

Does the Bible Condone Genocide?

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Christians typically accept that the Bible, being the Word of God, is trustworthy in all it affirms. In particular, they contend it has authority for faith and morals. One perennial challenge to such a stance is a series of jarring passages in the Old Testament which appear to teach that God has commanded genocide: the systematic extermination of entire ethnic groups.¹ But surely killing of an entire ethnic group is morally wrong. The Bible therefore teaches serious moral error.

Our discussion of this challenge will proceed as follows. In the first part, we will look at a representative argument against biblical authority which appeals to these texts; we examine one proposed by Raymond Bradley. We will argue that the cogency of Bradley's argument relies on two assumptions: first, that a person who accepts biblical authority is committed to claiming that God commands us to slaughter innocent men, women, and children; and, second, that it is always wrong to kill innocent people. We will argue that neither claim is, strictly speaking, correct. When these assumptions are appropriately qualified, the apparent contradiction in accepting the authority of the Bible dissipates.

Bradley's Argument Against Biblical Authority

A representative example of the kind of objection we will discuss is proposed by Raymond Bradley.² He contends that a "logical quandary arises" for any theist who believes that the Bible "is a reliable

guide to what we should and should not do."³ To show this, he lays out an argument, which takes for granted the following crucial moral principle (P1):

P1: It is morally wrong to deliberately and mercilessly slaughter men, women, and children who are innocent of any serious wrongdoing.⁴

What, then, is the quandary for the Bible-believing theist? Bradley asserts that this theist cannot, without contradiction, believe all of the following four propositions:

- (1) Any act that God commands us to perform is morally permissible.
- (2) The Bible reveals to us many of the acts that God commands us to perform.
- (3) It is morally impermissible for anyone to commit acts that violate principle P1.
- (4) The Bible tells us that God commands us to perform acts that violate moral principle P1.⁵

Bradley states that P1 is a universal principle "in the sense of being exceptionless – of holding, that is, for all persons, places, and times."⁶ By "God," Bradley means a "robust supernatural being"⁷ who is "omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect."⁸ Bradley's official formulation of (2) is this: "The Bible reveals to us many of the acts that God commands us to perform." On the face of it, this states that *many* of God's commands are revealed in the Bible.

However, the claim that the Bible accurately records many of God's acts is entirely compatible with the claim that it inaccurately records others, and hence, is not inconsistent with (1), (3), and (4).

However, elsewhere in the same article, Bradley makes it clear that he has a robust view of biblical authority in mind. He cites Peter van Inwagen's claim that "the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the revealed Word of God."⁹ Bradley also mentions Alvin Plantinga's contention: "Scripture is inerrant: the Lord makes no mistakes; what he proposes for our belief is what we ought to believe."¹⁰ Bradley cites these as typifying the view he tries to criticize – a position he refers to as *biblical theism*. This suggests that the tetrad should be rephrased as follows.

- (1) Any act that God commands us to perform is morally permissible.
- (2*) God is the author of the Bible.
- (3) It is morally impermissible for anyone to commit acts that violate principle P1.
- (4*) The author of the Bible commands us to perform acts that violate moral principle P1.

Bradley points out that these propositions (1)-(4*) are inconsistent. The biblical theist, however, is committed to (1) and (2*) and so must reject either (3) or (4*). However, Bradley contends the biblical theist cannot defensibly reject (3) or (4*). To do so is to either deny what the Bible clearly says or to endorse moral absurdities. It is this latter claim that we will dispute in this essay. That is to say, we will argue that a theist can defensibly reject both (3) and (4*).

Does the Bible Command the Killing of Innocent People?

Bradley argues that the biblical theist is committed to (4*), because to deny it flies "in the face of facts ascertainable by anyone who takes the care to read what the Bible actually says."

[C]onsider the case in which God commands Joshua to slaughter virtually every inhabitant of the land of Canaan. The story commences in chapter 6 of the book of Joshua, telling how the hero and his army conquer the ancient city of Jericho where they "utterly destroyed everything in the city, both man and woman, young and old." Then, in chapters 7 through 12, it treats us to a chilling chronicle of the 31 kingdoms, and all the cities therein, that fell victim to Joshua's, and God's, genocidal policies. Time and again we read the phrases "he utterly destroyed every person who was in it," "he left no survivor," and "there was no one left who breathed."¹¹

Bradley contends that the book of Joshua records the Israelites carrying out the "slaughter" of "virtually every man, woman and child in Canaan" at God's command. Hence, the author of the Bible commands us to perform acts that violate moral principle P1. This argument is flawed for several reasons.

Occasional vs. General Commands

First, the argument is a non sequitur. Bradley argues that because God commanded Joshua to exterminate every single person in Canaan, it follows that God commands *us today* to violate P1. This, however, does not follow. God commanded Abram to leave Ur of the Chaldees and Jonah to preach in Nineveh; it would be ridiculous to suppose that it is

part of every Christian's duty to obey these commands!¹² God is not in these passages commanding us to leave Ur or to preach to Nineveh. Consequently, the mere fact God commands someone to do something in Scripture does not mean he commands us to do it. To determine if a command truly is universal, we need to carefully examine the command in its proper context to determine whether it is a universal command to all people¹³ or an occasional command for a particular person at a particular time.

An examination of the commands God gave to Joshua suggests that they are isolated commands for a particular occasion. Deuteronomy 20 limits the command to "completely destroy" and "not leave alive anything that breathes" to the "cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance" (Deut 20:16 NIV). It is not a general requirement for all military campaigns and is in fact distinguished from other such campaigns. Similarly, in the Torah God *prohibited* Israel from conquering other neighboring nations such as Moab, Ammon, and Edom (Deut 2:4, 9, 19; 23:7), precisely because these nations did not live in the land God had given Israel. At best, Bradley's argument shows that at one point in history God commanded Joshua to violate P1 by issuing a command to exterminate every single Canaanite man, woman, and child in the land he had given them. Not that he commands us to violate P1.

Does the Bible Portray the Canaanites as Innocent?

However, even this more limited conclusion is not as straightforward an inference from the text as Bradley thinks. P1 is the principle that: "It is morally wrong to deliberately and mercilessly slaughter

men, women, and children *who are innocent* of any serious wrongdoing."¹⁴ The Bible, however, does not portray the Canaanites, in general, as innocent of any serious wrongdoing. In the book of Genesis, God gives Abraham and his descendants legal title to the land of Canaan. However, despite having legal title to the land, Abram and his descendants could not take immediate occupation of the land for 400 years. They had to wait until the "sin of the Amorites" had "reached its full measure."¹⁵

This was reiterated in the latter books of the Law which, centuries later, authorized Israel to take possession of the land because the Amorite iniquity was then complete. Deuteronomy states that Israel could drive the nations out "because of their wickedness" (Deut 9:4–5). The most exhaustive list of their wickedness comes from Leviticus 18 which chronicles incest, adultery, bestiality, ritual prostitution, homosexual acts, and, most significantly, child sacrifice (v. 10). God tells them that if they do not dispossess the Canaanites, "they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God" (Deut 20:18 NIV). They "will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods" (Deut 7:4 NIV); they will be a "snare" (Deut 7:16 NIV). Exodus is explicit: "They must not remain in your land, or else they will make you sin against Me. If you worship their gods, it will be a snare for you" (Exod 23:33). Additionally:

Do not make a treaty with the inhabitants of the land, or else when they prostitute themselves with their gods and sacrifice to their gods, they will invite you, and you will eat their sacrifices. Then you will take some of their daughters as brides

for your sons. Their daughters will prostitute themselves with their gods and cause your sons to prostitute themselves with their gods. (Exod 34:15–16)

This is prohibited because “in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods” (Deut 12:31 NIV).

Similarly, there are hints in the text that Canaanites who rejected these kinds of practices were to be spared. In the battle of Jericho, Rahab, the Canaanite innkeeper, is explicitly excluded from the command to destroy the city. The book of Hebrews states: “By faith Rahab the prostitute received the spies in peace and didn’t perish with those who disobeyed” (Heb 11:31). Rahab was a Canaanite, yet she was spared because she was not like those who are disobedient; she responded in faith. This suggests that any Canaanite who turned from the detestable practices mentioned would not be killed. Obedience to God, not ethnicity or national identity, appears to be the issue.¹⁶

This is further borne out by the fact that other Canaanites (i.e., the Shechemites) are included in Israel’s renewal ceremony mentioned at the end of Joshua 8: “Then all Israel, with their elders and officers and judges, stood on either side of the ark . . . the stranger as well as he who was born among them.” At Shechem, those who heard the Law being read included not only “the assembly of Israel” but also “the strangers who were living among them” (Josh 8:33, 35 NKJV). K. Lawson Younger summarizes the matter:

The *hērem* was not designed by God to eliminate the Canaanite culture per se but to eliminate the Canaanite religious influence. While it

may be readily recognized that it is difficult in many instances to separate the two, there is nonetheless a distinction. The Israelite *hērem* commandments had close links to the issues of idolatry and the breaking of the second commandment (Ex. 22:20 . . .; Deut. 7:26; 13:16–18 . . .). That this is the case in [the first introduction] of Judges (1:1–2:5) is reinforced by Yahweh’s confrontation of the nation in 2:1–5, where it is their failure on the religious front that is of primary concern.

In other words, the *hērem* was not concerned with the eradication of Canaanite clothing fashions, pottery styles, music, diet, and other types of particular cultural preferences. But it was deeply concerned with the eradication of the Canaanite religion: its gods/idols, altars, rituals, divinatory practices, uses of magic, and so on.¹⁷

Does the Bible Claim That God Commanded Extermination of Virtually Everyone in Canaan?

Not only are the inhabitants of Canaan not typically portrayed as innocent, but the Bible does not unequivocally state that God commanded Israel to *exterminate* every single Canaanite man, woman, and child in the Promised Land. The dominant language used in Scripture is not of extermination but of “driving out” and “thrusting out” the Canaanites (cp. Exod 23:28; Lev 18:24; Num 33:52; Deut 6:19; 7:1; 9:4; 18:12; Josh 10:28, 30, 32, 35, 37, 39; 11:11, 14).¹⁸ The Israelites were to “dispossess” the Canaanites (Num 21:32; Deut 9:1; 11:23; 18:14; 19:1). “Driving out” or “dispossessing” is different from “wiping out” or “destroying.” If you state that you had driven an intruder from your house, no one would assume

the intruder was dead in your living room. Similarly, if you say you had killed an intruder, one would not normally think this meant the intruder had been “driven out.” The Hebrew text confirms this; the same language of “driving out” and “casting out” is used elsewhere to refer to Adam and Eve being “driven” from Eden (Gen 3:24), Cain being “driven” into the wilderness (Gen 4:14), and David being “driven out” by Saul (1 Sam 26:19). All are cases where the meaning precludes something being literally exterminated.

This observation is reinforced by the fact that the biblical language of the Canaanites’ destruction is identical to that of Judah’s destruction in the Babylonian exile – clearly not utter annihilation. Indeed, God threatened to “vomit” out Israel from the land just as he had vomited out the Canaanites (Lev 18:25, 28; 20:22). In the context of the Babylonian invasion and Judah’s exile (sixth-century BC), God said he would “lay waste the towns of Judah so no one can live there” (Jer 9:11 NIV). Indeed, God said, “I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin” (Jer 25:9 NIV); note that this is the same verb (*haram*) as used of “utterly destroying” the Canaanites. God threatened to “stretch out My hand against you and destroy you” (Jer 15:6 NKJV; cp. Ezek 5:16)—to bring “disaster” against Judah (Jer 6:19). However, the biblical text suggests that while Judah’s political and religious structures were ruined or disabled, and that Judahites died in the conflict, the “urban elite” were deported to Babylon while many “poor of the land” remained behind.¹⁹ The language of destruction referred primarily to dispossession.

The same language is used in Isaiah

where God says, “I will consign Jacob to destruction [*herem*] and Israel to scorn” (Isa 43:28 NIV). Then in the very next verse (44:1), God tells “Jacob” whom he has “chosen” that he will restore his people and bring them out of exile under a new covenant in which he pours out his Spirit upon them.

A final point about dispossession: In the ancient Near East, national identity was connected to both a people’s land and the deity they worshipped. So, for example, the Moabites lived south-east of the Jordan; their deity Chemosh ruled from there. In Canaan, Baal was the territorial deity. In the act of destroying Canaanite idols and altars and driving out the Canaanites, this “breaks the ideological nexus between deity-people-land,”²⁰ We see this deity-nation-land connection in passages such as Isaiah 36:18–20, where the Assyrian emissary Rabshakeh taunts Jerusalem’s king Hezekiah and his dignitaries: “Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the power of the king of Assyria?” Yahweh, he claims, will not help Judah from Assyria’s attack, so the people and land would be defeated. Likewise, Rahab’s speech to the spies assumes this deity-nation-land connection. Terror filled the Canaanites because Israel’s God defeated nations such as Egypt and the Amorite kings Sihon and Og. Thus, Heath Thomas observes: “As the Canaanites were displaced and defeated, their gods were defeated and shown to be impotent and false,” and he adds that, interestingly, “Israel’s God, Yahweh, is the only God in the ancient Near East who is able to leave his land and people and then return to both in his own power (see Ezek 8–11; 43:1–9).”²¹ In sum, Israel’s infiltration into Canaan, the dispersion of the Canaanites, and the destruction of Canaanite religious objects would

reveal Yahweh's superiority over Baal and other Canaanite deities.

What about Joshua 7–12?

What then are we to make of the passages that Bradley cites – the references in Joshua 6–12 which record that Joshua “utterly destroyed everything in the city, both man and woman, young and old”; that “he utterly destroyed every person who was in it,” “he left no survivor,” and “there was no one left who breathed”? Bradley is correct that if these chapters are read in isolation from the rest of the narrative, and in a straightforward literal way, they appear to affirm that Israel slaughtered every inhabitant of the land of Canaan. There are, however, good reasons why these passages should not be read in a straightforward literal way.

Some of these reasons have been recently put forward forcefully by Nicholas Wolterstorff. He provides two lines of argument for rejecting the kind of literalistic reading on which Bradley relies.

Wolterstorff's Argument against Literalism

Wolterstorff's first line of argument is that “a careful reading of the text in its literary context makes it implausible to interpret it as claiming that Yahweh ordered extermination.”²² Wolterstorff begins by noting that “the text of Joshua as we have it today was intended as a component in the larger sequence consisting of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings.” For this reason we should interpret the book of Joshua as a “component within this larger sequence – in particular, that we interpret it as preceded by Deuteronomy and succeeded by Judges.”²³ When one reads it this way, certain features of the narrative become apparent.

One is that the passages Bradley cites are in obvious tension with what is affirmed elsewhere in the narrative. Chapters 7–11 state that Joshua went through the cities of southern and northern Canaan and “put all the inhabitants to the sword,” left “no survivors,” and “destroyed everything that breathed” in “the entire land.” Alongside these general claims, the text identifies several specific places and cities where Joshua “put all the inhabitants to the sword” and “left no survivors.” These include Hebron (Josh 10:36–37), Debir (Josh 10:38), the hill country, the Negev, and the western foothills (Josh 10:40). The section finishes in this manner: “So Joshua took the entire land, in keeping with all that the Lord had told Moses. Joshua then gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments. After this, the land had rest from war” (Josh 11:23).

However, when the text turns to giving an account of these tribal divisions only a chapter or so later, God said, “You have become old, getting on in years, but a great deal of the land remains to be possessed” (Josh 13:1). Then, in the next five chapters, it is stressed repeatedly that the land was not yet conquered, and the Canaanites were, in fact, not literally wiped out. Repeatedly, the author affirms that the very same regions were still occupied by the Canaanites who remained heavily armed and deeply entrenched in the cities. This is then followed by the opening chapters of Judges, which affirm eight times in a single chapter that the Israelites had failed to conquer the land or the cities and had failed to drive the inhabitants out. The Canaanites are said to be occupying the Negev (Judg 1:9), in the hill country (Judg 1:9), in Debir (Judg 1:11), in Hebron (Judg 1:10), and in the western foothills (Judg 1:9) – often in sig-

nificant numbers and strength. It finishes with the angel of the Lord at Bokim rebuking them for failing to drive the inhabitants out (Judg 2:1–5).²⁴ If one reads the whole narrative as a sequence, these are not subtle contrasts. They are, in Wolterstorff's words, "flamboyant." It is unlikely that an intelligent redactor would have missed something this blatant. Wolterstorff concludes:

Those whose occupation it is to try to determine the origins of these writings will suggest that the editors had contradictory records, oral traditions, and so forth to work with. No doubt this is correct. But those who edited the final version of these writings into one sequence were not mindless; they could see, as well as you and I can see, the tensions and contradictions – surface or real – that I have pointed to. So what is going on?²⁵

Wolterstorff's point is that regardless of what sources or strata of tradition are alleged to be behind the final form of Joshua, those who edited the final version of these writings into one sequence would have been well aware of the obvious tensions in the passages mentioned. Moreover, they were not mindless or stupid. Consequently, it is unlikely that those who authorized the final form of Joshua were using the text to assert literally that Joshua carried out an extermination of all the inhabitants of Canaan at God's command. Something else is going on.

It may be objected that Wolterstorff's argument here posits a false dichotomy: Either a consistent composite text or a stupid editor. However, that the editor must be intending to present a perfectly consistent narrative (literally or figuratively or a combination of both) is an assumption that is unwarranted by what is known about ancient editors.²⁶ Ancient

editors were not bothered by these sorts of contradictions the way modern people are. Their *literary* modus operandi – which included political or aesthetic considerations – was to faithfully preserve the source material despite its obviously contradictory nature when taken *literally*.

This objection misconstrues Wolterstorff's argument. He does not contend that an intelligent editor would not compose an inconsistent text. Even today, an intelligent person might do this for various reasons: an editor of a collected works for example might juxtapose several essays with quite different perspectives in a single volume to introduce readers to the main positions on a topic, or an author might preserve two sides of an important debate with the intention of convincing readers that a particular side had the better argument.²⁷ However, in none of these contexts is the editor affirming that the different perspectives are all correct. What Wolterstorff contends is that an intelligent person would not construct such a narrative and use it to affirm both that Joshua exterminated every single person in Canaan and also that large numbers of people in Canaan were not killed. Hence it is not sensible to read the text this way.

With this clarification in place, let's ask what would need to be the case for Wolterstorff's argument to be, in fact, postulating a false dichotomy. A false dichotomy occurs when a person postulates two options as mutually exclusive and exhaustive when in fact there is a third option. Hence, to contend that Wolterstorff's argument posits a false dichotomy, the objector must maintain that there is a viable third option where the authors of the final form use the text to affirm both that Joshua literally killed everyone in the region and to affirm that he did not kill everyone in the region. Moreover, the

objector must maintain that the authors of the text maintained this contradiction intelligently. That is a difficult task.

Nor do the reasons given overcome these difficulties. Suppose those who authorized the final form recognized the obvious contradictions in the text but did not care because they were not interested in harmonization. Nevertheless, they preserved their source material. This would suggest that in compiling the text they were not asserting that what it records – *both* that there were no survivors and that there were many survivors – literally occurred. Hence, it is a mistake for people such as Bradley to claim they did. None of these considerations suggests that, when they preserved the material in this way, they were using the texts to affirm that Joshua killed everyone and also that he did not.

Nor are appeals to ancient standards of accuracy or aesthetics relevant in this context. Whatever differences they had from us, it is clear that ancient Near Easterners knew that if an enemy wiped out their village and killed every last man and woman, then the people in that village were dead. It is exceedingly implausible that they would think it sensible to affirm otherwise.²⁸

Consequently, when the passages Bradley cites are read in context, it is implausible that those who authorized the final form of Joshua were using the text to assert that Joshua exterminated virtually every man, woman, and child in Canaan at God's command.

Wolterstorff's Argument for Hagiographic Hyperbole

What then is going on? This brings us to Wolterstorff's second line of argument. He suggests:

[T]he Book of Joshua has to be read as a theologically oriented narration, stylized and hyperbolic at important points, of Israel's early skirmishes in the Promised Land, with the story of these battles being framed by descriptions of two great ritualized events. The story as a whole celebrates Joshua as the great leader of his people, faithful to Yahweh, worthy successor of Moses. If we strip the word "hagiography" of its negative connotations, we can call it a hagiographic²⁹ account of Joshua's exploits. The book is not to be read as claiming that Joshua conquered the entire Promised Land, nor is it to be read as claiming that Joshua exterminated with the edge of the sword the entire population of all the cities on the command of Yahweh to do so. The candor of the opening chapter of Judges, and of Yahweh's declaration to Joshua in his old age that "very much of the land still remains to be possessed," are closer to a literal statement of how things actually went.³⁰

Wolterstorff cites various literary tropes in the text to support this. While Judges reads as "down to earth history," a careful reading of Joshua reveals it to be full of ritualistic, stylized, accounts, as well as formulaic language. In a footnote he notes the study of Lawson Younger. In a comprehensive comparative study of ancient Near Eastern conquest accounts, Younger documents that Joshua employs the same stylistic, rhetorical, and literary conventions of other war reports of the same period.³¹ Such accounts appear to be broadly hagiographic in nature. Younger also notes that such accounts are "highly figurative"³² and utilize what he calls a "transmission code": a common, frequently stylized, stereotyped, and often

hyperbolic way of recording history.

What is noteworthy is the hyperbolic nature of such accounts. They hyperbolically describe victories in terms of gods reigning meteors or hailstones down on the foe,³³ series of battles or a whole campaign taking place in one day, the numbers of armies and enemy casualties are rhetorically exaggerated, and, most importantly, victories are often described hyperbolically in terms of total conquest or complete annihilation and destruction of the enemy.

Some examples will illustrate this. In the Merneptah Stele, the Egyptian Pharaoh Merneptah describes a skirmish with Israel in which his armies prevailed, hyperbolically, in terms of the total annihilation of Israel. Similarly, *The Bulletin of Ramesses II*, a historical narrative of Egyptian military campaigns in Syria, narrates Egypt's considerably less than decisive victory at the battle of Kadesh with the rhetoric, "His majesty slew the *entire force* of the wretched foe from Hatti, together with his great chiefs and all his brothers, as well as *all* the chiefs of *all* the countries that had come with him." Mesha of Moab records his successful casting off of vassal status as "Israel is destroyed forever." The examples could be multiplied, but the point is that such accounts are hyperbolic and not intended to be taken as literal descriptions of what occurred.³⁴

Several objections to Wolterstorff's hagiographic hyperbolic reading of Joshua have been raised. Here we will focus on four.

Judges 20–21. The first is an appeal to Judges 20–21. In this story the allied tribes of Israel attack armies from the tribe of Benjamin. After several defeats, they prevail and a small number of Benjamite soldiers escape. After the battle, the

allied forces proceeded to kill every last woman and child in the land of Benjamin. This shocking story occurs as one of many illustrations of Israel's moral degeneration: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did whatever he wanted" (Judg 21:25; 17:6; 18:1; 19:1).³⁵ What is relevant for our purposes is that this account does not appear to be hyperbolic. After the massacre, the Israelites faced a problem: they wanted to show mercy on the tribe of Benjamin. However, only the few hundred soldiers who escaped are left, all their wives and children have been killed. The narrative consequently proceeds on the assumption that this is not hyperbole.

Prima facie, it is difficult to see an objection to Wolterstorff here. Wolterstorff argues that the accounts of massacre in Joshua are hyperbolic. This objection claims that Judges 20–21 is not hyperbolic. As Wolterstorff was not talking about Judges, it is difficult to see how this calls his conclusion into question. Those who make this argument however, have a rejoinder. They point out that Judges 20–21 uses similar language to Joshua. Seeing that the passage uses the same language as Joshua, and the account is clearly not hyperbolic in Judges, it cannot be hyperbolic in Joshua.

But this objection fails to understand that the same language, even the same phrase, can have different senses, whether hyperbolic or literal, depending on the context. The very nature of hyperbole involves taking language which can be literal in certain contexts and using the same language in a non-literal way. Consider an obvious example: your son throws mud on your newly washed car. Looking at the mess, you angrily say to yourself, *I am going to kill that kid!* In this context, a sensible and charitable

interpretation would understand that what you said was hyperbolic. Suppose, however, that a Mafia boss, referring to a teenager who has refused to pay protection money, states, "I am going to kill that kid!" In that instance we would take it literally in spite of the fact that the same phrase is used non-literally in other contexts. So, the fact that a phrase is used literally in Judges 20–21, by itself, does not provide grounds for thinking it is used that way in Joshua. What matters is the context in which it is uttered.

When one turns to context, however, it is clear that this argument is unsuccessful. The reason the objector contends that the account in Judges 20–21 is not hyperbolic is because the account is preceded by a narrative which assumes, and only makes sense, if the massacre actually happened. This context is the very opposite to that which we find in Joshua. In Joshua, the accounts of wiping out all the inhabitants incorporate narratives which assume the inhabitants were not wiped out but exist in large numbers, an assumption that continues into the book of Judges.

Rahab. A second objection to Wolterstorff's hyperbolic reading appeals to the story of Rahab in Joshua chapter 6. In chapter 5, Joshua encountered an angel who identifies himself as the commander of the Lord's army. When Joshua asks the angel if he is on Israel's side or the side of the Canaanites, the response is that the angel is not on either side. He is on the side of the Lord. After this (chap. 6), Rahab, a Canaanite woman who shows faith in God, is saved from destruction. But then (chap. 7) Achan, an Israelite who disobeys, is destroyed. The juxtaposing of these episodes and the similar language leads many commentators to conclude that the author here is making an explicit point: it is faithfulness to God's com-

mands, and not one's ethnicity that makes one a true Israelite. Moreover, it is disobedience, not ethnicity, that makes one subject to destruction.

How does this create a problem for Wolterstorff's hyperbolic reading? The objector suggests that once one sees the point being made, the total destruction of every single Canaanite is essential to the story. If Israel did not kill absolutely every last woman and child in Jericho except for Rahab and her family, then Rahab's survival could have been explained in ways other than as a reward for her loyalty to God. The author, then, must be asserting literal extermination. He is not offering a hyperbolic or hagiographic account of the events in question.

This conclusion, however, does not follow. First, consider that the suggestion is that unless the author asserts, literally, that everyone was killed, we cannot know Rahab was spared as a reward. This is dubious. Suppose I am given a reward of \$5,000 for assisting the police with an investigation. The same day another person wins \$5,000 in the lottery. Does the fact that someone else got the same amount of money I got undermine the fact that I got a reward? Would it mean that those who saw me get the reward are suddenly unable to know I did because it could have been luck? Obviously not! Similarly, if the text tells us that Rahab was spared because of her fidelity to God, then we know that she was spared for that reason because the author has told us. Someone else being spared out of luck or any other reason makes no difference.

Second, if the point of the story is that it is disobedience, not ethnicity, that makes one subject to destruction, then surely it is the literalistic reading that contradicts the point of the story not the hyperbolic reading. Taken literally,

Joshua 6–11 affirms that God commanded that everyone of a particular ethnicity be killed. He commanded the “total destruction” of the Canaanites not just in Jericho but in the entire land. Such a command is not essential to the point of the story that these critics elucidate. It contradicts the point of the story.³⁶

1 Samuel 15. William Lane Craig contends that Wolterstorff’s reading does not “do justice to the biblical text, which seems to say that if the Israelite soldiers were to encounter Canaanite women and children, they should kill them (*cf.* Samuel’s rebuke of Saul in 1 Sam 15: 10–16).”³⁷

Craig appeals to the account of Saul exterminating the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15. While Wolterstorff’s argument relates to Joshua, he applies the same reading to this passage. Like the Joshua accounts, the account in 1 Samuel 15 is part of a broader literary context with the rest of Samuel and the other canonical books, such as 2 Samuel and the book of Chronicles. When one reads the whole sequence, the same tensions one sees in Joshua are apparent: while 1 Samuel 15 describes Saul, at God’s command, exterminating the Amalekites, later passages in Samuel and Chronicles proceed on the assumption that this never literally happened.

The key passage is God’s command to Samuel to “strike [*nakah*] Amalek and utterly destroy [*haram*] all that he has, and do not spare [*hamal*] him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey” (1 Sam 15:3 NASB). The text goes on to explicitly state that the Amalekites were all wiped out:

So Saul defeated [*nakah*] the Amalekites, from Havilah as you go to Shur, which is east of Egypt. He captured Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly de-

stroyed [*haram*] all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared [*hamal*] Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed. (1 Sam 15:7–9 NASB)

A few verses later (15:33), the text records that Agag, the sole survivor, was executed. At face value this passage states that all the Amalekites were killed and all their livestock were either destroyed or taken as plunder to be sacrificed to God at Gilgal.³⁸

Now the language of “defeated” (or struck), “utterly destroyed,” and the reference to “sparing” and to livestock parallel the language of the command in 15:3. Given this, it seems implausible to suggest that we ought to interpret the command in verse 3 as literal but the fulfilment, just four verses later, as hyperbolic; the text requires that the command and fulfilment be read in the same sense.

However, when one reads this passage as part of a single narrative, it becomes untenable to think that those who edited these works into the final sequence were affirming that God literally commanded Saul to exterminate the Amalekites. This is because the following narrative emphatically states that the Amalekites were *not* wiped out. This is apparent in 1 Samuel 27:8–9 wherein David invaded a territory full of Amalekites:

David and his men went up and raided the Geshurites, the Girzites, and the Amalekites. From ancient times they had been the inhabitants of the region through Shur as far as the land of Egypt. Whenever David attacked the land, he did not leave a single person alive, either man or

woman, but he took flocks, herds, donkeys, camels, and clothing. Then he came back to Achish.

Not only does this affirm the continued existence of the Amalekites, but the reference to Egypt and Shur shows that they existed in the *very same area* that Saul “utterly destroyed every single one of them” in the previous passages. Moreover, David took sheep and cattle as plunder. Again, livestock was another of the things that Saul supposedly eradicated.

After the text has told us that Saul “utterly destroyed all the people,” including King Agag, and despite the text telling us that when David attacked an area (the very same areas as Saul) he did “not leave a single person alive,” we read three chapters later that *an Amalekite army* attacked Ziklag (1 Sam 30:1)! David pursued this army, fought a long battle with them, and *400 Amalekites* fled on horseback (1 Sam 30:7–17)! If Saul is supposed to have destroyed “every single one of them,” whence come these Amalekites?

But this is not the extent of such examples. In 2 Samuel 1:8, an Amalekite took credit for killing Saul, but didn’t Saul “utterly destroy *all* the people”? In 1 Chronicles 4:43 Amalekites were still around in battle-ready numbers during the reign of Hezekiah, a king who reigned after Saul and David.

Read literally the narrative affirms both that the Amalekites were and were not totally wiped out. This apparent contradiction in the Samuel narrative is not subtle. Unless we implausibly suppose that they were mindless or stupid, those who put these books into a single narrative would have been well aware of such blatant contradictions. If we read 1 Samuel 15 in the broader context of the rest of 1 Samuel, and also alongside other canonical books such as 2 Samuel and the

book of Chronicles, then the authors of the final form cannot be sensibly claiming that 1 Samuel 15, 1 Samuel 27, 1 Samuel 30, and 1 Chronicles 4 are all *literally* true accounts of battles with the Amalekites.

Furthermore, while David’s battle texts appear to be relatively matter-of-fact records, 1 Samuel 15 appears to be highly hyperbolic and contains obvious rhetorical exaggeration. If we take the biblical numbers as most Bible translations traditionally render them, then Saul’s army was said to include 210,000 men, which would make it larger than any army known at this time in antiquity. Moreover, we are told that Saul struck the Amalekites from Havila to Shur. Shur is on the edge of Egypt, and Havila is in Saudi Arabia. This is an absurdly large battle field! “It’s impossible to imagine the battle actually traversed the enormous distance from Arabia almost to Egypt.”³⁹ On the other hand, as Daniel Fouts notes, exaggerated numbers are common forms of hyperbole in ancient Near Eastern battle accounts.⁴⁰ On the other hand, Colin Humphreys has argued that there is some confusion on how the term *eleph* (“thousand,” “military division,” or “unit”) is to be understood, and he attempts to make sense of its usage in the Old Testament.⁴¹

At any rate, 1 Samuel 15’s use of the language of “utterly destroying [*haram*]” populations “with the sword” is the same phraseology as that which is repeatedly used hyperbolically in Joshua. This language also appears to have been used hyperbolically in 1 Chronicles 4. First Chronicles 4:41 states that “they attacked [*nakah*]” and “utterly destroyed them [*haram*]” (NKJV). But only a few verses later, we read that *the survivors* fled to Amalek where they were later all “destroyed [*nakah*]” a second time (1 Chron

4:43)! Likewise, the language of killing all inhabitants with the sword is also used hyperbolically in Judges: “after Judah puts Jerusalem to the sword . . . its occupants are still living there ‘to this day’ (Judg 1:8, 21).”⁴² Similar language is used hyperbolically in the prophetic writings.⁴³ Compare, for example, the language of God’s command to “not spare” the Amalekites, to “put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey” (NASB) with the account of Judah’s defeat by the Babylonians in 2 Chronicles 36:16–17 (NIV):

But they mocked God’s messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the Lord was aroused against his people and there was no remedy. He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians, who killed their young men with the sword in the sanctuary, and did not spare young men or young women, the elderly or the infirm. God gave them all into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar.

This was written to a post-exilic audience who knew full well that not every one of the Judahites had been killed. They, as the descendants of the survivors, knew that Judah had been exiled and was later restored under Cyrus – a fact pointed out only a few verses later (cf. 2 Chr 36:20–23).

So, we see in 1 Samuel that the author(s) juxtaposed several accounts. One tells us that Saul wiped out all the Amalekites at God’s command, using obvious rhetorical exaggeration and language known to be hyperbolic. The other, presented in fairly realistic terms, tells us that the Amalekites continued to live in the land as a military threat. Assuming the author wasn’t mindless or stupid, we are at least owed an argument as to why the literal reading should be preferred in this context.

Craig’s objection suggests an argument: “Samuel’s rebuke of Saul in 1 Samuel 15.10–16” suggests that Saul is condemned by Samuel for not “following God’s instructions.”⁴⁴ Now, as noted above, the text tells us that Saul *did* carry out God’s instruction to kill *all* the Amalekites. It was livestock, not humans, which were initially spared. Saul is rebuked for taking sheep as spoil. Nevertheless, one could argue that in Samuel’s amplification of his rebuke of Saul, he is rebuked for not taking the command literally; see the immediately preceding verses:

Samuel continued, “Although you once considered yourself unimportant, have you not become the leader of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel and then sent you on a mission and said: ‘Go and completely destroy the sinful Amalekites. Fight against them until you have annihilated them.’ So why didn’t you obey the Lord? Why did you rush on the plunder and do what was evil in the Lord’s sight?” (1 Sam. 15:17–19)

Craig appears to be arguing against a hyperbolic reading of 1 Samuel on the grounds that such a reading appears to contradict part of the Samuel narrative; he seems to suggest that a literal reading coheres better with this part. We would argue that the crucial issue is whether the hyperbolic interpretation is *more* plausible than the literal one. Even if Craig is correct about Samuel’s rebuke, it does not follow that a literal reading is more plausible than a hyperbolic one. As argued, a literal reading creates incoherencies in the narrative; it puts the whole account of 1 Samuel 15 in contradiction with the rest of the 1 Samuel narrative, particularly 1 Samuel 27–30. It also puts the account in contradiction with the recounting of Saul’s death in 2 Samuel 1 and the narra-

tive of 1 Chronicles 4.

It is difficult to believe the author(s) of the final form, who were meticulous in avoiding even a minor incoherence in 1 Samuel 15:17–19, were oblivious to the multiple obvious contradictions highlighted above. It is far more plausible to suppose that the author was willing to allow some minor inconsistencies in that part of the narrative which was not supposed to be taken as literally true than it is to suppose that he intended to affirm a highly contradictory literal reading. The conclusion one should draw is that these war narratives are highly hyperbolic accounts of victory that functioned rhetorically rather than as a precise historical record that was taken as literal truth. Elsewhere in these texts, the authors quite candidly affirm they are not literally true accounts.

The Midianites. Another apparent “genocide” text is Numbers 31, in which the Israelites “waged war against Midian, as the Lord had commanded Moses, and killed every male” (v. 7). Later, Moses commanded them to “kill all the male children and kill every woman who has had sexual relations with a man, but keep alive for yourselves all the young females who have not had sexual relations” (vv. 17–18). Are we to assume that apart from the surviving female virgins, every last Midianite was killed? A closer literary look reveals something similar to the Canaanite and Amalekite passages discussed above – and looks nothing like total slaughter.

When we look beyond Numbers 31 to the broader literary and canonical context and take into account narratives presented elsewhere in this context, we see a much different picture. While we read in Numbers 31:7 that the Israelites “killed every male,” we continue reading in the

broader canonical context that this did not literally happen at all. In Judges 6 and 7, which is literarily connected to the Hexateuch (the Pentateuch and Joshua), the Midianites invaded Israel in numbers said to be “like a great swarm of locusts. They and their camels were without number” (Judg 6:5). These swarms of Midianites caused Israel to flee to the “mountains, caves, and strongholds” (Judg 6:2). Just how decimated were the Midianites in Numbers 31? Not very. Once more we encounter a highly exaggerated warfare account: whereas, on the one hand we are told that no one remained alive, we see ample evidence of survivors in robust numbers on the other. “Annihilating” or “utterly destroying” looks more like merely “defeating” or “disabling.”⁴⁵

Rhetorical Function and Ideology. A final objection argues that people like Wolterstorff who appeal to Lawson Younger’s study misunderstand it. One conclusion Younger draws from his study is that the transmission code employed in Joshua 9–11 reflects the same imperialistic ideology as other ancient Near Eastern conquest accounts. This ideology means that “victory must be described in black and white terms since there is only a ‘them’ vs. ‘us’ relationship.”⁴⁶ The point of such rhetoric, however, is to inspire fear and obedience in those subjects who hear it.⁴⁷ If the reader just heard such rhetoric as exaggeration, then the rhetoric would not have had the effect it was intended to have.

This inference is mistaken, firstly, because it is false that hyperbolic rhetoric must be taken literally in order to inspire fear and obedience. Suppose a boxer before a boxing match states that he is going to murder his opponent and make his children orphans. This sort of rhetoric is designed to inspire fear and intimidate.

Does it follow that it is intended to be taken literally? Similarly, school bullies tell potential victims that if they “nark,” the bullies will “kill them and smash their heads in.” Do the victims have to believe they will literally be killed and have their heads *actually* smashed in order to get the message? Secondly, Younger makes it clear that the accounts in question were hyperbolic. He states that the description of victory in “black and white terms” is an example of the “figurative aspect” of such accounts and part of the “extensive use of hyperbole.”⁴⁸

The Implications of Wolterstorff’s Argument

Wolterstorff draws two conclusions from his hagiographic / hyperbolic reading of Joshua. First, Joshua’s “utter destruction” of the Canaanites is exactly what “Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded”:

- “Joshua captured all these kings and their cities and struck them down with the sword. He completely destroyed them, as Moses the Lord’s servant had commanded” (Josh 11:12).
- “The Israelites plundered all the spoils and cattle of these cities for themselves. But they struck down every person with the sword until they had annihilated them, leaving no one alive. Just as the Lord had commanded His servant Moses, Moses commanded Joshua. That is what Joshua did, leaving nothing undone of all that the Lord had commanded Moses” (Josh 11:14–15).
- “. . . so that they would . . . be completely destroyed without mercy, and be annihilated, just as the Lord had commanded Moses” (Josh 11:20).

Joshua’s comprehensive language echoes

Moses’ sweeping commands to “consume” and “utterly destroy” the Canaanites, to not “leave alive anything that breathes.”⁴⁹ Scripture clearly indicates that Joshua fulfilled Moses’ charge to him. So *if* Joshua did just as Moses commanded and *if* Joshua’s described destruction was really massive hyperbole common in ancient Near Eastern warfare language and familiar to Moses, *then* clearly Moses himself did not intend a literal, comprehensive Canaanite destruction.⁵⁰

Second, because the accounts are highly hyperbolic, one cannot draw the conclusion that the author uses them to assert that the Israelites were literally commanded to exterminate every man, woman, and child in Canaan.

So what was the writer asserting – assuming he did not intend it as pure fiction, which I very much doubt? Not easy to tell. When a high-school basketball player says his team slaughtered the other team last night he’s not asserting, literally now, that they slaughtered the other team. What is he asserting? Not easy to tell. That they scored a decisive victory? Maybe, but suppose they barely eked out a win. Was he lying? Maybe not. Maybe he was speaking with a wink of the eye hyperbole. High school kids do.⁵¹

In the same way, when one realizes that Joshua is hagiographic and highly hyperbolic in its narration of what occurred, the best one can conclude from the accounts of “killing everyone that breathed” is that

Israel scored a decisive victory and once you recognize the presence of hyperbole it is not even clear how decisive the victories were. Joshua did not conquer all the cities in the land, nor did he slaughter all the inhabitants in the cities that he did conquer. The book of Joshua does not say that he did.⁵²

Conclusion

When we bring together the threads of the above discussion, several things are evident. First, God does not, in the Bible, command us to engage in acts that violate P1. The Bible records a command to a specific people for a specific time, not a general command to all people. Second, it portrays the Canaanites as guilty of serious crimes and suggests that people who turned from these crimes could be saved. Third, the command is typically phrased, not in terms of extermination, but in terms of “driving out” the occupants. Fourth, while some accounts talk of “putting all inhabitants to death with the sword” and “leaving alive nothing that breathes,” the evidence suggests that these are highly hyperbolic hagiographic accounts and that those who authorized the text were not asserting that this language is literally true. Clearly, a biblical theist can reject (4) of Bradley’s argument. That is, she rightly rejects the conclusion that God commands us to mercilessly kill men, women, and children who have committed no serious wrong.

Still, one might object that God does command the Israelites to drive the Canaanites out with force, and that, even granting the general wickedness of the Canaanites and the presence of extensive hyperbole, it seems implausible that in such battles no innocent people were killed – or that every single innocent person escaped destruction. This brings us to our next question: “Can the biblical theist reject (3)?” Proposition (3) states: “It is morally impermissible for anyone to commit acts that violate principle P1” – namely, that “it is morally wrong to deliberately and mercilessly slaughter men, women, and children who are innocent of any serious wrongdoing.”

Is It Always Wrong to Kill Innocent People?

Bradley suggests a biblical theist cannot reject (3). To do so

would be to ally oneself with moral monsters like Genghis Khan, Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot. It would be to abandon all pretense to a belief in objective moral values. The denial of (3), then, would be tantamount to an embrace of moral nihilism. And no theist who believes in the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount could assent to that.⁵³

Bradley claims that denying (3) has two problematic implications. First, denying (3) entails nihilism: it entails that no action is morally wrong. Second, denying (3) entails that the atrocities of Genghis Khan, Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot were not morally wrong. Both stances are incompatible with the moral teachings of Scripture, and hence with what a biblical theist is committed to affirm.

William Lane Craig’s Argument

William Lane Craig has provided a straightforward way that a biblical theist can deny P1 without embracing nihilism. Bradley’s argument relies on the claim that P1 is a “universal principle” in the sense of “being exceptionless – of holding, that is, for all persons, places, and times.” However, Craig argues that technically P1 is not an exceptionless principle. Reflecting on God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Craig argues that in this highly unusual case, God, for the sake of some greater good, exempted Abraham from a moral principle that otherwise would be binding on him.⁵⁴

Craig’s argument for this conclusion consists of three premises.⁵⁵

(i) “Our moral duties are constituted by

the commands of a loving and just God.”⁵⁶ (Craig here proposes a divine command theory of ethics, whose thesis is analogous to the way water is constituted by H₂O.)

- (ii) A loving and just God, in normal circumstances, prohibits killing the innocent.
- (iii) In very unusual circumstances in the past, God commanded people to kill the innocent for the sake of some greater good.

These three claims entail that (3) is false. Propositions (i) and (ii) entail that killing the innocent is normally wrong. However, (i) and (iii) entail that it was not wrong, in those highly unusual situations, where a loving and just God had morally sufficient reasons and valuable ends in mind when commanding killing in these instances. Hence, strictly speaking, P1 does not hold for *all* persons, places, and times.

Craig’s argument suggests a way biblical theists can reject (3) without committing to either of the problematic implications that Bradley points to. Craig’s position does not entail that no action is morally wrong. Both (i) and (ii) entail that with the exception of a few highly unusual cases, killing of the innocent is wrong. Nor does Craig’s position commit a biblical theist to endorsing the atrocities of Genghis Khan, Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot. This would follow only if the biblical theist believes that Hitler, Stalin, and Genghis Khan were commanded by God to do what they did. However, nothing about Craig’s position commits a biblical theist to this claim. Craig maintains that cases where God commands this are highly unusual past occurrences. He believes they occurred only because there is compelling Scriptural evidence they did. There is no comparable evidence that

Hitler or Stalin received such a command, and in the absence of such evidence, “we should be highly skeptical of someone who says, ‘God has commanded me to kill so and so!’”⁵⁷ In fact, a biblical Christian may have theological reasons for thinking that such commands would not occur outside of the extremely unusual events recorded in salvation history.⁵⁸ Therefore, adopting this view, one could even accept that killing the innocent is, for practical purposes, absolutely wrong.

The success of Craig’s position depends on whether a biblical theist can rationally accept (i), (ii), and (iii). The claim that a biblical Christian can accept (ii) seems uncontroversial. The biblical theist already accepts that a loving and just God exists, and it is obvious that such a God would, in normal circumstances, prohibit killing the innocent. The question, then, is whether a biblical theist can accept (i) and (iii).

Standard Objections to Divine Command Ethics

Craig’s argument relies on a divine command theory of ethics. Many, however, contend that such theories are indefensible for a variety of reasons. Here we will focus on one. Divine command theories are said to suffer a debilitating problem: they make morality arbitrary; anything at all could be deemed “right” as long as God commanded it – even raping or torturing other people for fun. This objection assumes that it is possible that God could command atrocious, intrinsically evil acts. However, this assumption goes beyond being dubious to being obviously false. We need to remember that we are not talking about right or wrong as being based on the commands of just anyone. We are talking about God, who is defined by Bradley as “omnipotent, omniscient,

and *morally perfect*.”⁵⁹ A necessarily good being is incapable of issuing such commands.

So, as the terms are defined, the claim that it is possible for God to command people to torture others for fun is true only if it is possible for a morally perfect person to command such an atrocious thing. But this is analytically impossible! The very reason critics cite examples such as torturing people for fun is because these actions are paradigms of conduct that no morally good person could ever entertain or endorse.

One rejoinder to this response is that if some action is wrong because God prohibits it, then God cannot be said to be good in any meaningful sense. The claim “God is good” turns into no more than the claim that God obeys his own commands. If this is so, can God be said to have any duties at all?

The suggestion that if God has no duties, then he cannot be said to be good in any meaningful sense, has a grain of truth to it. If we are going to understand God’s goodness in terms of God having duties that he consistently fulfils, then a divine command theory cannot account for God’s goodness. However, why must the phrase “God is good” be understood in terms of God having duties?

Critics commonly misconstrue divine command theory because they confuse “morality” and “goodness,”⁶⁰ and many theologians and philosophers have suggested an alternative, namely, that God’s goodness should be understood in terms of God having certain character traits. To claim God is good is to claim that he is truthful, benevolent, loving, gracious, merciful. He is opposed to certain actions such as murder, rape, torturing people for fun, and so on. Now, even if God does not have duties, it does not follow that he

cannot have character traits such as these. It is true that God is not under any obligation to love others or to tell the truth or what have you, but that does not mean he cannot love others or tell the truth. While God does not have to have a duty to do something in order to do it, God’s intrinsic goodness of character means that he does act in these ways despite not being obligated or required to do so.⁶¹

So the most common criticism of a divine command theory fails. We contend that the other objections raised in the literature fare no better.⁶²

Robert Adams’s Objection: Can One Coherently Claim That God Commands a Violation of P1?

The real question about Craig’s argument involves his premise (iii). To escape the objection that a divine command theory makes morality arbitrary, the divine command theorist must appeal to the fact that God is good: he possesses certain virtues such as being loving, just, truthful, benevolent, gracious, merciful, and so on. God’s possession of these traits means that it is not possible for him to command just anything, such as the torture of children. Robert Adams has argued this means there are limits to the commands one can coherently attribute to God.⁶³ We have some grasp of what goodness is and what kinds of things a good person does not command. It follows that God cannot coherently be called good if what he commands is contrary to “our *existing* moral beliefs.”⁶⁴ To do so would be “playing word games which are intellectually dishonest”⁶⁵ and would deprive “the word ‘holy’ of its ordinary meaning and make it a synonym for ‘evil.’”⁶⁶ But one of our existing moral beliefs is P1, so we cannot

coherently attribute this command to a loving and just God.

This argument is too quick. Critics of Adams have pointed out that his conclusion is more qualified than it appears. While he states that “our existing moral beliefs” are a constraint on our beliefs about God’s commands, he goes on to state that God cannot issue “a set of commands that is *too much* at variance with the ethical outlook we bring to our ethical thinking.”⁶⁷ The phrase “too much” suggests that one can accept a set of commands that is somewhat at odds with the outlook we bring to our ethical thinking.

Two points Adams makes elsewhere suggest that this qualification is necessary. First, while we do have some grasp of what is good and some grasp of what is right and wrong, it is evident that our moral judgements are fallible.⁶⁸ While God does not command wrongdoing, it is likely that a perfectly good omniscient being would command something contrary to what *we think* is wrong. To say otherwise dogmatically assumes we are such good judges of morality that God could never disagree with us.

Second, our moral concepts are subject to revision. We change our opinions about the goodness and rightness of certain things without “playing word games which are intellectually dishonest” or depriving “the word ‘holy’ of its ordinary meaning and making it a synonym for ‘evil.’” If this were not the case, one could never honestly or rationally change one’s mind on an ethical issue. Adams notes this when he writes that he accepts “the possibility of a conversion in which one’s whole ethical outlook is revolutionized, and reorganized around a new center,”⁶⁹ but argues that “we can hardly hold open the possibility of anything too closely approaching a revolution in which, so to

speak, good and evil would trade places.”⁷⁰

These points, however, limit Adams’ conclusion. What his argument, in fact, shows is not that “our *existing* moral beliefs must serve as a constraint on our beliefs about what God commands,” but rather that *certain types* of our existing beliefs do this. Namely, those ethical beliefs which are so central to our concept of goodness that rejecting them would be “approaching a revolution in which, so to speak, good and evil would trade places.”⁷¹ Baggett and Walls refer to these as “convictions of the deepest ingression that they are truly non-negotiable, and unable to be relinquished – not just psychologically, but rationally, at least without perverting morality itself.”⁷² They refer to such convictions as non-negotiable moral beliefs.

Rissler gives two examples of cases where a purported divine command violates a non-negotiable belief.⁷³ The first is where God issues a command to reverse one’s conception of right and wrong or issues a set of commands that negates a large number of moral imperatives that one currently accepts. Second, he suggests that a command might contradict a moral belief “sufficiently integral to one’s conception of morality” that abandoning that belief would force such a radical revision as to destroy one’s concept of goodness altogether. Imagine a command to kill everyone around you purely for entertainment, or a command that said harming, hurting, and inflicting suffering on people for no reason at all is permissible. Or consider a command to hate God and despise all other human beings. Similarly, one cannot accept a system of divine commands where every duty we believe in is declared false. Nor can we accept a system which suggests that the vast majority of our moral beliefs are mistaken. This

would come too close to the problematic revolution of which Adams speaks.

The key question, then, is not whether P1 is one of our existing moral beliefs, but whether it is a non-negotiable belief. On closer investigation, it becomes apparent that P1 is not a non-negotiable belief. Many ethicists contend that while the claim “It is wrong to kill innocent people” is correct as a general rule, it can be overridden in rare circumstances of “supreme emergency”⁷⁴ – for example, when the alternative to killing non-combatants in war is to tolerate significantly greater evils, and the consequences of refraining from killing are significantly bad. Whatever one thinks of this position, it cannot be dismissed as conceptually incoherent. If a proponent of an absolutist position on killing non-combatants examined the arguments and concluded that, in rare circumstances of supreme emergency, killing non-combatants was not wrong, then it is implausible to suggest that their concept of goodness was so radically at odds with prior beliefs that “good and evil would trade places,” or that their position consisted of mere word games. This position may be false, but it is not obviously incoherent. Hence, taken as a universal, P1 is not a non-negotiable principle.

Of course it is plausible that P1 is a non-negotiable belief when it is not taken as universal. The claim that in normal circumstances it is wrong to kill the innocent is central to our understanding of morality. Craig’s position accepts P1 as a generally valid principle like this. He states that only in highly extraordinary, unusual cases in the past has God commanded such killing.

Kant’s Objection: Can One Rationally Believe God Commands a Violation of P1?

Even if one can coherently believe that God commanded a violation of P1, questions can be raised as to whether it is ever rational to believe this. The classic statement of this objection comes from Immanuel Kant:

Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: “That I ought not kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God – of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even is [read: if] this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven.”⁷⁵

Kant’s argument presupposes an epistemic principle: *whenever two conflicting claims differ in epistemic status, the claim with the lower status is to be rejected.*⁷⁶ He contends that moral claims such as “it is wrong to kill innocent people” are certain. However, claims that God commands or forbids a certain action are not certain and never can be. Hence, even if it is coherent to claim that God has commanded P1, one can never rationally accept such a claim is true.

Philip Quinn notes two problems with Kant’s argument. First, “Kant has an extremely optimistic view of our ability to attain epistemic certainty about principles of moral wrongness.”⁷⁷ He thinks we can be *certain* of moral claims *across the board*. This, however, is dubious. There are some moral claims of which we are very confident. We are certain, for example, that it is wrong to inflict as much pain as we can on another merely for our own entertainment. We are quite certain that killing, assault, theft, and lying are *prima facie* wrong; they can only be justified if some overriding moral reason

applies. However, many moral claims are far from certain at all. Similarly, consider moral debates about capital punishment or euthanasia or affirmative action. While there are defensible and justified answers to these questions, we doubt that we can claim *certainty* about answers to these questions.

Second, Kant claims that we can *never* be certain that God has commanded a particular action. Even if this is true, Quinn notes, “It would thus seem to be well within God’s power to communicate to us a sign that confers on the claim that God commands [an action] a fairly high epistemic status.”⁷⁸ So there appears no reason for thinking that moral claims about the wrongness of specific actions must always have a higher epistemic status than claims about God’s commands.

In fact, the claim that moral claims have a higher epistemic status than theological claims is very dubious. Christopher Eberle has masterfully argued that many skeptical worries raised about belief in God’s commands apply with equal force to moral beliefs.⁷⁹ Eberle notes problems such as the lack of public intelligibility, public accessibility, replicability, fallibilism, external criticism, independent confirmability, and proof of reliability, levelled against theological beliefs all apply to moral beliefs.⁸⁰ It’s not true, then, that moral beliefs always have a higher epistemic status than beliefs about God’s commands.

At this point the objector could offer this rejoinder: “True, not all moral claims have a high epistemic status, but surely the claim that it is morally wrong to deliberately kill the innocent is one that does.” However, this response fails to note a distinction: the claim that in normal circumstances it is wrong to kill innocent people strikes us as almost fairly cer-

tain. However, the claim that it’s *never under any* circumstances permissible to do so, is, in contemporary ethical theory, extremely controversial.⁸¹ That there are rare exceptions to rules against killing when there is some greater good involved is widely accepted in contemporary ethics: threshold deontology, act-utilitarianism, rule-utilitarianism, situation ethics, and Rossian deontology all accept this conclusion. *It is, at best, controversial that a principle rejected by almost all of the major ethical theories on offer today is more plausible than belief that God on rare occasions commanded violations of P1.* Surely, some argument is needed before the biblical theist is required to accept this controversial claim.

So, the standard arguments against Craig’s premise (iii) fail. There does not seem any compelling reason why a biblical theist cannot claim that God has on rare occasions, for the sake of a greater good, exempted people from the prohibition to kill by commanding them to do so.

Conclusion

Our discussion has led to two conclusions. First, those who accept biblical authority are not committed to the claim that God commanded the extermination of every single man, woman, and child in Canaan. The biblical narrative is far more nuanced. Rather, the picture is predominately one of God commanding the Israelites to drive out people who were occupying land they (the Israelites) had title to – a people who had been engaging in criminal activity for centuries. Furthermore, there is evidence within the text itself that exceptions could readily be made, and Canaanites who rejected these evil practices were spared. Moreover, many of the accounts are highly hyperbo-

lic and are not to be taken as literally affirming extermination. Also, this hyperbolic command was an occasional one for a specific situation and was not a general requirement for all people at all times.

Second, people who accept theism can defensibly claim that God has in the past, and on rare occasions, exempted people from the moral requirement to not kill

the innocent to achieve some greater good without being committed to morally absurd conclusions. Taken together, we think these conclusions mean that the biblical theist is not committed to either contradictions or moral absurdity by accepting the conquest narratives as part of the authoritative Word of God.⁸²

Notes:

1. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “genocide” as “the deliberate and systematic extermination of an ethnic or national group” (OED 2010). This definition is standardly used in the skeptical literature on this topic as, for example, in Wes Morriston, “Ethical Criticism of the Bible: The Case of Divinely Mandated Genocide,” *Sophia* 51, no. 1 (2012): 117; and Edwin Curley, “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” in *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, ed. Michael Bergmann, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rea (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 62.
2. Raymond Bradley, “A Moral Argument for Atheism,” in *The Impossibility of God*, ed. Michael Martin and Ricki Monnier (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2003), 144. Similar arguments have been made in Wes Morriston, “Did God Command Genocide? A Challenge to the Biblical Inerrantist,” *Philosophia Christi* 11, no. 1 (2009): 8–26; Randal Rauser “Let Nothing that Breathes Remain Alive: On the Problem of Divinely Commanded Genocide,” *Philosophia Christi* 11, no. 1 (2009) 27–41; Michael Tooley “Does God Exist?” in Michael Tooley and Alvin Plantinga, *The Knowledge of God* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2008), 73–77; Evan Fales, “Satanic Verses: Moral Chaos in Holy Writ,” and Curley, “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” in *Divine Evil?*; Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “Why Traditional Theism Cannot Provide an Adequate Foundation for Morality,” and Louise Antony, “Atheism as Perfect Piety,” in *Is Goodness without God Good Enough? A Debate on Faith, Secularism and Ethics*, ed. Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).
3. Bradley, “A Moral Argument for Atheism,” 144.
4. *Ibid.*, 132.
5. *Ibid.*, 144.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 131
8. Raymond Bradley, “Opening Statement” in a debate with Matthew Flannagan, “Is God the Source of Morality? Is It Defensible to Ground Right and Wrong in the Commands of God?” (Auckland University, Auckland, New Zealand), accessed February 26, 2012 at <http://www.mandm.org.nz/2010/08/raymond-bradleys-opening-statement-bradley-v-flannagan-debate.html>.
9. Peter van Inwagen, “Genesis and Evolution,” in *Reasoned Faith*, ed. Eleonore Stump (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 97.
10. Alvin Plantinga, “When Faith and Reason Clash: Evolution and the Bible,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 21, no. 1 (September 1991): 8.
11. Bradley, “A Moral Argument for Atheism,” 137.
12. Richard Mouw, “Biblical Revelation and Medical Decisions” in Stephen E. Lammers and Allen Verhey, *On Moral Medicine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 56.
13. Or more often a specific application of a universal command to a particular context.
14. One objection to this point can be quickly dealt with: that one cannot trust the biblical accounts of Canaanite practises because the authors of this text engaged in unjustified extermination of the peoples in question. This objection is obviously circular: it assumes that the Bible is not trustworthy because it commands extermination. That, however, is precisely the conclusion the argument is supposed to establish. One cannot assume it is unreliable in one’s interpretation of the text and then use the interpretation to argue that it is unreliable. In any event, the question being asked in this section is whether a person who accepts the Bible as the Word of God and hence authoritative, is committed to holding God commands the killing of innocent people. Pointing out these people are mistaken for accepting the Bible is authoritative does not answer the question of how one should interpret it *if* it is assumed it is.
15. Gary Anderson comments: “*Even if the land of Canaan will become part of the eternal patrimony of the descendants of Abraham it is not a land that God can simply hand over at will. The rights of the citizens who presently reside upon it must be respected. God will not evict them until their immoral ways justify such a*

punishment.” Gary Anderson, “What About the Canaanites?” in Bergmann, Murray, and Rea, *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, 280 (italics added).

16. See the section on Rahab (pp. 312–13).

17. K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges/Ruth*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 26–77.

18. Glenn Miller notes that the “dispossession” words outnumber the “destruction” words by *three to one!* “This would indicate that the dominant ‘intended effect’ was for the peoples in the land to migrate somewhere else.” So, consider Deut 12:29–30: “When the Lord your God annihilates the nations before you, which you are entering to take possession of, and you drive them out and live in their land, be careful not to be ensnared by their ways after they have been destroyed before you. Do not inquire about their gods, asking, ‘How did these nations worship their gods? I’ll also do the same!’” (see Glenn Miller, “How Could a God of Love Order the Massacre/ Annihilation of the Canaanites?” Accessed February 27, 2012 at <http://christianthinktank.com/qamorite.html>).

19. Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2003), 281–85.

20. Heath Thomas, “The Old Testament ‘Holy War’ and Christian Morality,” in *How and Why We Should Read the Old Testament for Public Life Today*, an issue of *Comment* (Fall 2010): 24.

21. *Ibid.* For further discussion on this triad, see Daniel I. Block, *The Gods of the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000); Daniel I. Block, *Ezekiel*, NICOT, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997, 1998); Walter Brueggemann, *The Land*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002). Thanks to Heath Thomas for his comments on this point.

22. Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Reading Joshua,” in Bergmann, Murray, and Rea, *Divine Evil?* 249.

23. *Ibid.*

24. In addition to these general claims about exterminating populations, Josh 11:21 states, “Joshua proceeded to exterminate the Anakim from the hill country—Hebron, Debir, Anab—all the hill country of Judah and of Israel.” This happened *after* Joshua is already said to have killed the inhabitants in these areas in Josh 10:30–40. Joshua 11:22 states that no Anakim were left living in Israelite territory after this campaign. In Judg 1:20 the text explicitly states that Anakim are in Hebron.

25. Wolterstorff, “Reading Joshua,” 251.

26. This modernistic literary imposition on ancient texts is quite evident when it comes to the first-century Mediterranean world, let alone the ancient Near Eastern world. Modern misunderstandings about ancient matters such as, say, exact quotations, journalistic precision, and what counts for plagiarism exemplify the kind of false expectations raised in the sphere of contemporary scholarship. See E. Randolph Richards, “Will the Real Author Please Stand Up? The Author in Greco-Roman Letter Writing,” in *Come Let Us Reason*, ed. Paul Copan and William Lane Craig (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012).

27. Plato’s dialogues would be an obvious example.

28. Another problem with this objection is that it assumes the tensions in question are between different sources that those who edited the final form into a single sequence used. This, however, is false. Several of the same tensions Wolterstorff notes occur within literary units which source critics attribute to a single source. Consider three examples: (a) Joshua 10:20 states that Joshua and the sons of Israel had “finished striking” and “wiped out” (ESV) their enemies. Immediately thereafter, however, the text affirms that the “survivors went to fortified cities.” In this context, the language of total destruction is clearly hyperbolic. (b) In the account of the battle of Ai, Joshua’s troops feign a retreat; the text states that “all the men of Ai” are pressed to chase them. “Not a man remained in Ai or Bethel who did not go after Israel” (Josh 8:16–17 NIV). Joshua lures the pursuers into a trap “so that they were caught in the middle, with Israelites on both sides. Israel cut them down, leaving them neither survivors nor fugitives” (Josh 8:22–23 NIV). Then the text immediately following states: “When Israel had finished killing all the men of Ai in the fields and in the desert where they had chased them, and when every one of them had been put to the sword,” they went to the city of Ai and killed all the men in it (Josh 8:24 NIV). (c) Joshua 11:21–22 states: “At that time Joshua proceeded to exterminate the Anakim from the hill country—Hebron, Debir, Anab—all the hill country of Judah and of Israel. Joshua completely destroyed them with their cities.” This happened *after* Joshua is already said to have killed the inhabitants in these areas in Josh 10:30–40. All these tensions are within the block material that makes up Joshua 1–12 which typically are attributed to the same source. Further examples could be supplied. Goldingay notes the same tensions occur not just between Joshua 1–12 and Judges 1–2, but within Judges 1–2 itself: “While Joshua does speak of Israel’s utterly destroying the Canaanites, even these accounts can give a misleading impression: peoples that have been annihilated have no trouble reappearing later in the story; after Judah puts Jerusalem to the sword, its occupants are still living there ‘to this day’ (Judg 1:8, 21)” (see his “City and Nation,” in *Old Testament Theology: Israel’s Life*, vol. 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 570).

29. As contemporary examples of what he means by hagiography Wolterstorff provides the example of North American tales of the noble Puritan or Washington crossing the Delaware. These are idealized, exaggerated accounts of the past designed to teach a moral lesson; those who tell them are not intending to affirm them as precise accounts of what actually occurred. There is obvious literary embellishment and hyperbole involved in the telling of such stories.

30. Wolterstorff, "Reading Joshua," 252–53.
31. K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990).
32. Younger states, "As the ancient historian (ancient near eastern biblical or otherwise) reconstructed historical referents into a coherent description, he produced a figurative account, a representing representation." Younger suggests such an historian functioned as "a literary artist." He goes on to state: "Ancient near eastern conquest accounts are figurative in three ways: (1) the structural and ideological codes that are the apparatus for the texts production, (2) the themes or motifs that the text utilises, and (3) the usage of rhetorical figures in the accounts." See K. Lawson Younger Jr., "Judges 1 in Its Near Eastern Literary Context," in *Faith Tradition and History: Old Testament Historiography and Its Ancient Near Eastern Context*, ed. A. R. Millard, J. K. Hoffmeier, and D. W. Baker (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 207.
33. Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*, 208–11 and 217.
34. These examples are taken from Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 173–74 (emphasis added); and Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*, 227–28, 245.
35. Prior to the battle, Yahweh tells Judah to go first, but God doesn't promise victory (20:18); they badly lose the battle, and God says to go up against them (20:23). After the second defeat, God promises that he will give Benjamin into their hands (20:28). The upshot is that *God intentionally allows Israel to lose as judgment on the general moral decay throughout the land*. Younger argues that the tone of Yahweh is sarcastic and ultimately disapproving (see K. Lawson Younger, *Judges and Ruth*, NIVAC [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002], 370–76); and Daniel I. Block *Judges, Ruth*, NAC 6 (Nashville: B&H Academic, 1999), 342–45, 567–70.
36. Hebrews 11:31 states, "By faith Rahab the prostitute received the spies in peace and didn't perish with those who disobeyed." One might argue that this teaches that Rahab was the only person in the city who was not disobedient and hence was the only one who survived. The objector could then go on to argue that it is implausible that in a city which contains men, women, and children, everyone would be guilty, and so in reality Joshua did slaughter innocent children. This argument, however, appears to be dialectically confused. The person who makes it assumes that the text is accurate when it claims that Joshua killed everyone but that the Bible is inaccurate when it calls everyone in the city guilty. In other words, this argument cannot be an argument which shows the Bible is inaccurate because it assumes this as a premise. Also, it is worth noting that this conclusion relies on the assumption that the text portrays everyone in the city, except Rahab, as guilty and that this is implausible because in real life cities contain innocent people. But that is exactly Wolterstorff's point—the text is hyperbolic; it's exaggerated; it's not intended to describe exactly what happened in real life. So, far from being an argument against the hyperbolic hagiographic reading, this argument assumes its falsity. But one does not refute an interpretation by assuming it is false and then using this assumption to prove that it is. Indeed, a couple of other interesting layers to our discussion could be added. (1) The "city [*ir*]" in Canaan was more like a citadel—a military and administrative center rather than a location where women and children resided (which would have been in the hill country). See Richard S. Hess, "The Jericho and Ai of the Book of Joshua," in *Critical Issues in Early Israelite History*, ed. Richard S. Hess, Gerald A. Klingbeil, and Paul J. Ray Jr. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 33–46. (2) The Israelite attacks on cities were merely disabling raids—not acts of utter decimation—something we see both from archaeology and the biblical text: "these campaigns were essentially disabling raids: they were not territorial conquests with instant Hebrew occupation. The text is very clear about this." Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 162.
37. William Lane Craig, "Question 225: The 'Slaughter' of the Canaanites Re-visited." Available at <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=8973>.
38. "But I did obey the Lord!" Saul answered. "I went on the mission the Lord gave me: I brought back Agag, king of Amalek, and I completely destroyed the Amalekites. The troops took sheep and cattle from the plunder—the best of what was set apart for destruction—to sacrifice to the Lord your God at Gilgal" (1 Sam 15:20–21).
39. Ralph W. Klein, 1 Samuel, WBC 10 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 150.
40. Daniel M. Fouts, "A Defense of the Hyperbolic Interpretation of Numbers in the Old Testament," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40, no. 3 (1997): 377–87.
41. Confusion about these numbers is connected to the term *eleph* (commonly translated as "thousand"). Old Testament scholar Colin Humphreys seeks to make sense of the extraordinarily large numbers. For instance, he argues that the total number of men, women, and children who left Egypt at the exodus were 20,000 rather than 2 million. The total number of Israel's fighting men (in Num 2:32) was written as 598 + 5 *eleph* (meaning "military division" or "unit"). We have mixed numbers in Num 1:46:
- 598 military divisions (*eleph*)
 - 5 thousand (*eleph*) and
 - 5 hundred and 50 men
- A plausible interpretation of this is that the number of military men over 20 years of age was not 603,550 but around 5,550. Humphreys argues that this number was conflated by a later scribe or editor (adding 598 *eleph* + 5 *eleph* = 603,550 men), and the original meaning was overlooked or forgotten. Or perhaps the last unit in

the sequence could refer to the final tally (“adding up to”). For example, a number like 74,600 (in Num. 2:4) could be read as 74 military divisions adding up to 600 men. At any rate, Humphreys suggests that the original meaning of *eleph* came to be overlooked or forgotten.

Consider another example: “three thousand” go and fight Ai, and “thirty-six” Israelites are killed, frightened, and routed (Josh 7:5); this would be strange if 3,000 went in to fight at Ai (see Colin J. Humphreys, “The Numbers in the Exodus from Egypt: A Further Appraisal,” *Vetus Testamentum* 48 (1998): 196–213; and Colin J. Humphreys, “The Numbers in the Exodus from Egypt” *Vetus Testamentum* 50, no. 3 (2000): 323–28.

42. Goldingay, “City and Nation,” in *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 3 (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2009), 570.

43. On the similarities between the hyperbolic language used to describe the destruction of the Canaanites and of the Judahites in the exile in the prophetic literature, see the discussion in the section titled, “Does the Bible Claim That God Commanded Extermination of Virtually Everyone in Canaan?” (p. 303.)

44. William Lane Craig, “Question 225: The ‘Slaughter’ of the Canaanites Re-visited.”

45. This is argued in more detail by Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1990), 490–91.

46. Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*, 234.

47. Except of course in Joshua, the object one is to fear and obey is God; in the other accounts it is human rulers. We think this makes a substantive moral difference, the unqualified allegiance to an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good God is very different to unqualified obedience to a human ruler.

48. Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*, 234.

49. Deuteronomy 7:2 declares: “when the Lord your God delivers them over to you and you defeat them, you must completely destroy them.” Similarly, Deut 20:16–17 commands: “you must not let any living thing survive. . . . You must completely destroy them.” In Joshua 10 one sees the formulaic language of “and the Lord gave [the city]” and he/they “struck it and its king with the edge of the sword” until “there was no one remaining” (NRSV). The chapter is summarized this way: “So Joshua defeated the whole land . . . ; he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed” (v. 40 NRSV). The similar phraseology between Deuteronomy and Joshua is quite evident.

50. Wolterstorff, “Reading Joshua,” 252. Younger himself notes that something like this is the case. On p. 235 he suggests that the phrase “totally destroy” expresses the concept of a “total war (i.e., the destruction of the population as well as the military).” Some have cited this to suggest that Lawson’s study shows that such warfare by definition involved the killing of both the military *and* the civilian population, and so this language cannot be chalked up to hyperbole. This, however, does not follow.

First, the fact that a concept by definition means something does not mean the word used to express the concept cannot be used hyperbolically. The concept of a dog by definition refers to a canine animal; it does not follow one cannot talk about “raining cats and dogs” or one cannot insult a person by calling him a dog. Yet in neither case does the person intend to assert, literally, that canines fall from the sky or that a person is a canine. Second, in a footnote to this same reference, Younger notes the fact that elsewhere in the biblical text God states that the Canaanites will be slowly “driven out” and not literally exterminated; this meant that in practice the command to “totally destroy” the population was not intended to be always literally carried out in practice. Similarly, on pp. 226–28, he repeatedly states that the phrase “totally destroy” is “used hyperbolically” in Joshua. Similarly, on pp. 243–47, he argues that the accounts of total destruction in Joshua are “figurative and hyperbolic,” meaning that these passages do not contradict the accounts elsewhere in Joshua and Judges that presuppose the population has not been wiped out.

51. Wolterstorff, “Reply to Antony,” in Bergmann, Murray, and Rea, *Divine Evil?* 263.

52. Wolterstorff, “Reading Joshua,” presented at the “My Ways Are Not Your Ways” conference; this paragraph was in the paper presented at the conference but was omitted from the published version.

53. Raymond Bradley, “A Moral Argument for Atheism,” 136.

54. See section 21 of William Lane Craig’s “Post Debate Comments” in *The Craig-Curley Debate: The Existence of the Christian God*, University of Michigan, February 5, 1998 accessed February 28, 2012 <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5283>. Philip Quinn documents that Craig here reflects a long line of Christian interpretation (see his “The Recent Revival of Divine Command Ethics,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50 (Fall 1990): 345–65).

55. Craig has presented his position largely in popular writings and debates; the argument here given is a reconstruction of what we believe is the argument in these writings and debates.

56. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations of a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 531.

57. Craig, “Post Debate Comments,” section 21.

58. Consider, for example, the cessationist view held by people like B. B. Warfield, J. Gresham Machen, F. N. Lee, Richard B. Gaffin Jr., John F. MacArthur, and Daniel B. Wallace that prophetic utterances ceased with the close of the apostolic period.

59. Raymond Bradley, “Opening Statement.”

60. For further discussion of this common confusion, see Matthew Flannagan, "The Premature Dismissal of Voluntarism," *Colloquium: The Australian and New Zealand Theological Review* 42, no. 1 (2010): 38–66.
61. For further discussion of this point, see Matthew Flannagan, "Tooley, Plantinga and the Deontological Argument from Evil," *Philosophia Christi* 13, no. 2 (2011): 385–88.
62. For a discussion and rebuttal of the standard objections to divine command theories, see Philip L. Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Philip L. Quinn, "Divine Command Theory," in Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory, ed. Hugh Lafollette (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 53–73; Philip L. Quinn, "Theological Voluntarism," *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 63–90. See also Edward Wierenga, *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into the Divine Attributes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 215–27; idem, "Utilitarianism and the Divine Command Theory," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (1984): 311–18; idem, "A Defensible Divine Command Theory," *Nous* 17 (1983): 387–408; David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Flannagan "The Premature Dismissal of Voluntarism," 38–66.
63. Robert M. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 250.
64. *Ibid.*, 256.
65. Raymond Bradley's opening statement in "Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?" in his debate with William Lane Craig (Vancouver, BCCanada: Simon Fraser University, 1994), accessed January 14, 2011 at <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5301>.
66. Bradley, "A Moral Argument for Atheism," 143.
67. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 256.
68. Adams calls this the "transcendence" of the good. "All of God's commands and judgments are right; God is the ethical standard. But our beliefs (even the most cherished) about them must be distinguished from God's commands and judgments themselves. To fail to make that distinction is idolatry. We express our respect for the distinction between God and us by maintaining a critical stance toward ethical and theological beliefs, being ready in principle to consider arguments against any of them, though we may quite rightly be strongly attached to some of them" (Robert M. Adams, "Responses," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64, no. 2 [2002]: 485).
69. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 256.
70. *Ibid.*
71. James Rissler, "A Psychological Constraint on Obedience to God's Commands: The Reasonableness of Obeying the Abhorrently Evil," *Religious Studies* 38 (2002): 140–41.
72. Baggett and Walls, *God Good*, 135.
73. Rissler explains this: "In such an instance, obedience requires that one give up everything one previously believed about morality . . . one has been commanded to relinquish everything one understands about the nature of goodness, one will have no concept of the good with which to identify God's command, there will be complete breakdown between everything one currently affirms about goodness and everything one is asked to believe about goodness" ("A Psychological Constraint on Obedience to God's Commands," 140–41).
- 74 See Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), esp. chap. 16. See also Igor Primoratz, "The Morality of Terrorism," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 14 (1997): 221–33.
75. Immanuel Kant, "Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason" (1793), in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. A. W. Wood and G. Di Giovanni (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 203–4. Elsewhere Kant writes:
- That to take a human being's life because of his religious faith is wrong is certain, unless (to allow the most extreme possibility) a divine will, made known to the inquisitor in some extraordinary way, has decreed otherwise. But that God has ever manifested this awful will is a matter of historical documentation and never apodictically certain. After all, the revelation reached the inquisitor only through the intermediary of human beings and their interpretation, and even if it were to appear to him to have come from God himself (like the command issued to Abraham to slaughter his own son like a sheep), yet it is at least possible that on this point error has prevailed. (Immanuel Kant, "The Conflict of the Faculties" [1798], in *Religion and Rational Theology*, 283).
76. Philip Quinn "Religion and Politics," in *The Blackwell Guide to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William Mann (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 316.
77. *Ibid.*, 318.
78. *Ibid.*, 319.
79. Christopher Eberle, *Religious Convictions in Liberal Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 234–87.
80. Kant's own reasoning suggests this. As noted above (n75), he contends we can never be certain that God has commanded an action because "the revelation reached the inquisitor only through the intermediary of

human beings and their interpretation, and even if it were to appear to him to have come from God himself (like the command issued to Abraham to slaughter his own son like a sheep), yet it is at least possible that on this point error has prevailed” (“The “Conflict on the Faculties,” 283). But this is equally true of many moral beliefs. A good amount of what people believe with regards to morality comes to them through the intermediality of human beings and their interpretation. Most Westerners’ beliefs in liberal ideals, such as the equality of women, opposition to slavery, and so on, are mediated through human beings and traditions our parents bequeathed to us—indeed, have been given shape by the biblical tradition (see Alvin Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004]. Moreover, even if we directly intuit moral properties, it is possible that we are mistaken. Human moral intuitions and judgments are fallible and can err.

81. Remember, Bradley understands P1 as a universal norm.

82. Matthew Flannagan would like to thank Zachary Ardern and Andrew Harland-Smith for help with getting this essay into shape. Paul Copan would like to thank Heath Thomas for his input.

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